

False Prophets Who are They?



Thrust Statement: **False prophets are those who lead men away from God.**

Scripture Reading: **Matthew. 7:15**

INTRODUCTION

As stated in Part One, it is significant that the phrase *false prophet* only appears seven times in the New Testament, not always with the same connotation.^[1] A careful reading of the Scriptures that contain this phrase is quite revealing. One quickly discovers that the phrase is employed in the context of those who lead men away from God through the denial of Jesus as the Messiah, or through ethical conduct that does not glorify God, or through claiming to be the Messiah Himself.^[2] Even when writers of the New Testament do not employ this expression (false prophets) to warn believers about the teachings and practices of certain men and women, one is not left in the dark as to the concerns of the writers in calling attention to behavior and beliefs that will damn one's soul (see **Revelation 2:18-29**). This section of the essay seeks to understand this utterance as employed by Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount.

As one reads this examination of **Matthew 7:15**, hopefully, one will not allow his or her own prior frame of reference to be the determining factor in seeking to understand this most abused text. Christians frequently, though unconsciously, employ the Bible to prove a biased perspective against anyone who does not toe-the-line in harmony with their particular fellowship. The interpreter lives in his or her own subjective world. If one wishes to unpack **Matthew 7:15**, one must be committed to the context. Many groups within the Stone/Campbell Movement utilize this Scripture to justify separation from other believers over points that God has never addressed; especially, one's attitude toward a so-called worship service with its five ritualistic acts. Duncan Ferguson is correct when he writes: "Whenever anyone attempts to 'hear' what the text has to say, that person inevitably hears and identifies the sounds from within a prior structure of experiences or preunderstanding."^[3]

EXPOSITION OF THE PHRASE **FALSE PROPHETS** IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Just a perusal of Matthew's Gospel reveals that this phrase is only employed three times, each time by Jesus (**7:15; 24:11, 24**).^[4] It is significant that in all three occurrences, the phrase is applied to those who seek to lead people away from God. But in **Matthew 7:15**, the emphasis on false prophets is associated with the Pharisees and the Scribes (teachers of the Law). After the baptism of Jesus, one finds Jesus in Galilee. It is in this geographical location that one discovers Jesus' preaching His now famous Sermon known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus warns His disciples about a righteousness that is external, a righteousness that does not proceed from the heart. Toward the end of His Sermon, Jesus speaks of the religious leaders with a stinging rebuke:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? (Matthew 7:15-16).^[5]

What precipitated this warning and condemnation of the religious leaders? As one reads carefully the Sermon on the Mount, one quickly discovers that Jesus is dealing with the ethical behavior of the leaders in Israel. In this Sermon, Jesus begins by expounding upon the characteristics that must be visible in the life of His followers. In setting forth kingdom behavior, Jesus gives a contrast between the conduct of the religious leaders of His day and the performance God expects of His people. In this antithesis, one is immediately introduced to the distinctiveness of "false teachers" versus uniqueness of "true teachers."

Jesus initiates His Sermon on the Mount with patterns of behavior that true prophets/teachers will practice and encourage others to carry out. In this renowned Sermon, Jesus commences with actions that exemplifies behavior that pleases God: (1) "Blessed are the poor in spirit" [**Matthew 5:3**]; "Blessed are those who mourn" [**5:4**]; "Blessed are the meek" [**5:5**]; "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" [**5:6**]; "Blessed are the merciful" [**5:7**]; "Blessed are the pure in heart" [**5:8**]; "Blessed are the peacemakers" [**5:9**]. In these beatitudes, Jesus stresses that one must be bankrupt in spirit, humble in attitude, gentle in lifestyle, hungering and thirsting after holiness, exhibiting mercy, developing purity, and seeking to promote peace, not discord.

The true teacher longs for the virtues that belong to God. After enumerating the beatitudes, Jesus continues to explain to His disciples how men and women are to put into practice right conduct that gives pleasure to God. He demonstrates this by giving detailed instructions concerning murder (**5:21-26**), adultery (**5:27-30**), divorce (**5:31-32**), oaths (**5:33-37**), retaliation (**5:38-42**), behavior toward enemies (**5:43-48**), correct motive in giving (**6:1-4**), proper attitude in prayer (**6:5-15**), legitimate aim in fasting (**6:16-18**), setting proper priorities (**6:19-24**), disposition of trust in God (**6:25-34**), and an admonition to put an end to censorious judging (**7:1-6**).

Sandwiched between the beatitudes (**5:1-16**) and the erroneous teachings of the "Pharisees and the teachers of the law" (**5:21—7:1-6**), Jesus gives a synopsis of the relevancy of the law (**5:17-20**). To set the tone for a proper interpretation of the phrase

false prophets in **Matthew 7:15**, the first employment of this phrase in Matthew's Gospel, it is necessary to eliminate difficulties that stand in the way of listening anew to the biblical text. One needs to cut his teeth on the concrete meaning of "false prophets" in the light of its context, not church tradition.

What did Jesus say about the Pharisees and the teachers of the law? Were these men the "false prophets" in **Matthew 7:15**? Is not **Matthew 7:15** the climax of the Sermon on the Mount, along with the two illustrations of the wise and foolish builders? Is Jesus not warning against the behavioral habits of the religious leaders of His day? Did He not say, "**By their fruit you will recognize them**" (**7:16**)? Were the religious leaders concerned about justice and mercy, about the poor and the widows? Or were they more concerned about rituals than they were about things that mattered to God? Jesus called upon the disciples to reevaluate and reinterpret what had been handed down to them through the "tradition of the elders." The religious leaders of that day, equivalent to preachers of our day, were so used to reading the Scriptures as they had been taught by generations of interpreters that they identified their interpretation with the Word of God itself.

An excellent illustration of identification of one's interpretation with the Word of God is from Jesus' skirmish with the "Pharisees and teachers of the law" (**15:1**) over "the tradition of the elders" (**Matthew 15:1-20**). These "Pharisees and teachers of the law" questioned Jesus about His disciples' behavior concerning the "tradition of the elders" (**15:2**), and, in response to their question, Jesus rebuked them for their substitution of tradition for the "command of God" (**15:3**). This observation should prepare one to understand more clearly Jesus' attention to the law in His Sermon. The "traditions of the elders" made it almost impossible to read the Bible without spectacles. Thus, Jesus, in His Sermon, went right to the heart of the matter in calling attention to the "false prophets":

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-20**).**

In this pericope (section), Jesus draws a contrast between two kinds of people. Apparently, there were those who did not keep the commandments of God and, at the same time, taught others to break them (See also **15:1-20**). On the other hand, there were those who practiced and taught the commandments of God. Again, it is the individuals who taught others to break God's commandments whom Jesus addressed toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount (**7:15**). Beginning with **Matthew 5:21** and concluding with **Matthew 5:48**, Jesus contrasted His teachings with the teachings of the religious leaders. He begins by calling attention to what they had heard from the teachers of the law: "**You**

have heard that it was said to the people long ago” (5:21); on the other hand, Jesus gives the true interpretation of the law by saying: “But I tell you” (5:22).^[6]

Since Jesus dealt with the “Pharisees and the teachers of the law” in His Sermon on the Mount, this understanding should facilitate a clearer view of these false teachers by acquainting oneself with their known behavior. Just what role do the Pharisees and Scribes (teachers of the law) play in Matthew’s narrative about Christ? It is worthy of note that Matthew opens his book with John’s confrontation with these religious leaders (Matthew 3) and closes his book with Jesus’ strong rebuke of these same Pharisees and teachers of the law (Matthew 23).^[7] This group plays such a major role in Jesus’ ministry that Matthew introduces his readers to this group of religious leaders in the inauguration of John’s ministry:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance (3:7-8).

John the Baptist called upon the Pharisees and Sadducees to “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8). In this same matter, Jesus, after cataloging a list of fruits, said, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (7:15). As mentioned above, Jesus begins his Sermon with a reference to the “Pharisees and teachers of the law” (5:20). On two other occasions (12:38 and 15:1), Matthew combines the Pharisees and teachers of the law in a confrontation with Jesus. In one of these wars of words, they wanted a sign from heaven to authenticate Jesus as the Messiah. But, once more, Jesus exposed their hypocrisy (12:38-45). These religious leaders play an important role in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ ministry. For example, Matthew employs the term “Pharisees” twenty-eight times and the phrase “teachers of the law” nineteen times^[8]

The First Major Controversy

To assist one in his or her understanding of Matthew 7:15, one needs to reread Matthew’s Gospel in order to get a bird’s-eye view of the whole scenario of Jesus’ encounter with the religious leaders. The first major controversy with the religious leaders occurs in Matthew 9. In this chapter, Jesus rebukes the leaders of Israel for their “insincerity.” Jesus had just performed a number of miracles (chapter 8): for instance, [1] He healed a man with leprosy (8:1-4); [2] He healed the centurion’s servant (8:5-13); [3] He healed Peter’s mother-in-law and cast out demons and healed all the sick (8:14-17); [4] He calmed the storm (8:28-34); [5] He healed two demon-possessed men (8:28-34); and, finally, He healed a paralytic (9:1-2).

As a result of these miracles, the leaders of Israel reacted negatively toward His healing ministry. Immediately following the healing of the paralytic (9:1-2), Jesus reacted strongly toward their inner thoughts. Matthew writes: “At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, ‘This fellow is blaspheming!’” (9:3). Notice that this accusation of blasphemy was not verbalized but remained within their own evil minds. But Jesus looked into the inner recesses of their depraved minds and said, “Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?” (9:4). For the first time in Matthew’s Gospel, the religious leaders and Jesus have direct contact. These controversies

foreshadowed the final significant debate that Jesus had with the leaders of Israel. Jesus' ministry began with conflict and ended with conflict.

The Last Major Controversy

This last argument took place during the last week of Jesus' ministry. The following is a brief summary of the events that transpired during Jesus' final week:

- The Triumphal Entry ([21:1-11](#))
- The Cleansing of the Temple ([21:12-17](#))
- The Last Controversies with the Jewish Leaders ([21:18—23:39](#))
- The Olivet Discourse concerning the End of the Age ([chapters 24-25](#))
- The Anointing of Jesus' Feet ([26:11-13](#))
- The Arrest, Trials, and Death of Jesus ([26:14—27:66](#))
- The Resurrection ([chapter 28](#))

During this final week (Passion Week), the hostilities with the religious leaders escalate ([chapters 21-23](#)), and then they put Him to death ([chapters 26-27](#)). These leaders continue to see themselves as the lawful leaders of Israel and, at the same time, the legitimate interpreters of Scripture and the official holders of their religious heritage or traditions. [Chapter 21](#) narrates [1] Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem ([21:1-11](#)), [2] Jesus at the temple ([21:12-17](#)), and [3] the withering of the fig tree ([21:18-22](#)). It was then, according to Matthew, that the chief priest and elders questioned the authority of Jesus: "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" ([21:23](#)).

Again, as in His earlier major encounter with the religious leaders, He exposes them for their hypocrisy. To begin with, Jesus questioned them about the origin of John's baptism ([21:24-27](#)). In their response, they revealed their true character in the same way that they had manifested when they went out to hear John the Baptist preach in the wilderness ([3:7-10](#)). Prior to this last great controversy ([chapters 21-23](#)), Jesus had previously, according to the apostle John, brought to their attention two facts: [1] that their existence did not originate in God, and [2] that their allegiance belonged to Satan ([John 8:13, 44](#)).

Matthew, too, records the head-on clash that led to Jesus' allegations ([Matthew 21-22](#)). Following the narration of this clash, Matthew gives the reaction of the religious leaders concerning Jesus' parables: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them" ([21:45](#)). Matthew further informs his readers that "they looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet" ([21:46](#)). Earlier, in the beginning of His ministry, the disciples of Jesus had cautioned Jesus about His remarks against the Pharisees.

Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a

pit” ([15:12-14](#)).

This final controversy with the religious leaders was not something new with Jesus.^[9] The climax of Jesus’ ministry concludes with his final denunciation of these false prophets. Matthew, once more, as he brings to an end his Gospel, opens this discourse of controversy with Jesus’ questioning these evil leaders. For example, He interrogates these insincere men about John’s baptism, as stated above, and after their refusal to answer His question about John’s baptism ([21:24-27](#)), He responds with three parables that condemn these dishonest leaders: [1] The Parable of the Two Sons ([21:28-32](#)); [2] The Parable of the Tenants ([21:33-46](#)); and [3] The Parable of the Wedding Banquet ([22:1-11](#)).

The Parable of the Two Sons

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’” ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him ([21:28-32](#)).

In the Parable of the Two Sons ([21:28-32](#)), He rebukes the Jewish leaders for their refusal to change their minds and believe, even though they had seen God at work in Him. As one reads Matthew’s narrative of the events, one cannot help but wonder if his readers did not reflect upon these same leaders in the prologue to his Gospel when he wrote:

When he [Herod] had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel’” ([2:4-6](#)).

This Parable of the Two Sons is a slap-in-the-face against the false prophets in [Matthew 7:15](#)—and they knew it. Following this parable, Jesus presented another parable—The Parable of the Tenants.

The Parable of the Tenants

Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the

tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. ‘But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:” ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet (**21:33-46**).

In this second parable (**21:33-46**), Jesus demonstrates that the leaders of Israel failed to meet their responsibilities to God (**21:34-36**). Even when God sent His Son, they rejected Him (**21:37-40**). With these parables, Jesus places the religious leaders in the history of rejection of God’s Anointed One. God is now giving the vineyard to those who will accept Jesus (**21:41-44**). Matthew makes known to his readers that the leaders knew that these three parables were spoken against them (**21:45**). Instead of repentance, the leaders looked for a way to arrest Him (**21:46**). These leaders are the false prophets of **Matthew 7:15**. Once more, Jesus presented another parable to draw attention to their rejection of the One whom God sent—The Parable of the Wedding Banquet.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. “Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’ “But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. “Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him

outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 'For many are invited, but few are chosen' (22:1-18).

In this third parable (22:1-18), Jesus makes the same point about the relationship of the religious leaders and God's kingdom. This parable is a direct rebuke against the leaders. The major themes of this parable are: [1] The king prepares a wedding banquet (22:2); [2] those invited find excuses not to attend and, then kill those sent with invitations (22:3-6); [3] the king responds by destroying their city as punishment^[10] and invites outsiders to attend (22:8-10); and [4] the leaders are warned that if they do not dress properly, then they will be thrown out (22:11-14). Over and again, Jesus nails the coffin shut on these false teachers in Matthew 7:15.

THE CONSPIRACY OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Now, four scenes follow these parables in which various combinations of the religious leaders combine their efforts to defeat and to put an end to this supposed troublemaker (22:15-22). The various sects combined their efforts to work together in order to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people. Immediately following the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, one observes the Pharisees and the Herodians in a clandestine operation to try to entrap Him. Matthew preserves this undercover operation for the extermination of Jesus.

Pharisees and Herodians

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away (22:15-22).

The first scene combines the Pharisees and the Herodians. These two groups schemed together to try to silence Him. They tried to lay a trap for Him over the payment of taxes to Caesar (22:15-16). Insincerity controls this pericope. In this showdown, Jesus calls these religious leaders hypocrites (22:18). Why did He call them hypocrites? Matthew informs his readers that Jesus knew "their evil intent" (22:18). In the next scene, one observes the extreme insincerity of the Sadducees in questioning Him about marital relationships after the resurrection.

Sadducees

That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children

for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?" Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching ([22:23-33](#)).

The second scene embraces the Sadducees questioning Him about marriage at the resurrection ([22:23-33](#))—they did not believe in the resurrection ([22:23](#)). They were spiritually blind in their understanding of the Scriptures ([22:29-31](#)); they were also spiritually blind in that they did not understand the power of God ([22:29](#)). Again, one recognizes an underhanded manipulation to catch Him in an entanglement that they imagined was hopeless to escape. But they failed just as their cohorts' efforts also misfired in their attempt to try to get Him in hot water with the people or with the authorities. In the next episode, one looks at an expert in the law trying his hand.

A Pharisee: An Expert in the Law

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" ([22:34-40](#)).

The third episode involves their efforts to entrap Him over the greatest commandment in the law ([22:34-35](#)). Jesus knew that the Pharisees were devious, sly, dishonest, foxy, crooked and shrewd; He knew that this question was to test Him. Thus, Jesus in response to their question also asked them a question about who Christ is.

Pharisees

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, " 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions. ([22:41-46](#)).

The fourth incident embodies the gathering together of the Pharisees. Jesus took

advantage of this occasion and asked them to answer the question: “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” (22:42), but they refused to answer (22:41-45). The religious leaders abandon their attempt to show that He posed a theological threat to their traditions through His exposition to the law. As one reflects upon the question Jesus asked the Pharisees, surely the readers of this Gospel must have recalled this same question to the apostles (16:13-20). During His conflict (21:18—23:39), Jesus goes to the very heart of their problems: “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (22:29).

SEVEN WOES AGAINST THE LEADERS OF ISRAEL

Following this final conflict with the religious leaders, Jesus summarizes their many faults and addresses them as “hypocrites” and “blind guides” (Matthew 23). In His brief explanation of the leaders, He warns His disciples to obey them, not to copy them: “So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (23:3).

Matthew 23 details one of the most graphic descriptions available in all of Scripture about the decadence of Israel’s leaders. Jesus issues seven woes against the religious leaders (23:13-33). Before enunciating the seven woes, He, like a bolt of lightning, goes to the very core of their corrupt nature: “Everything they do is done for men to see” (23:5).^[11] The seven woes announced by Jesus are devastating to these leaders. This detailed analysis is given in order that one may ascertain beyond the shadow of a doubt, as to whom Jesus had in mind when He spoke of false prophets in Matthew 7:15). The following is His stinging condemnation of the false prophets issued in seven woes:

1. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to (23:13-14).
2. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (23:15).
3. “Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it (23:16-22).
4. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind

guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel (**23:23-24**).

5. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean (**23:25-26**).
6. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness (**23:27-28**).
7. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous” (**23:29**; full text is **23:29-39**).

In this conversation against the religious leaders, Jesus castigates them as “blind” five times (**22:16, 17, 19, 24, 26**) and as “hypocrites” six times (**23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29**). They did not understand the important things in God’s revelation. These leaders did not go for inner purity but were content with externals (**23:23, 27-28**). They were faultless in their observance of their rituals, but they were short on “justice, mercy and faithfulness” (**23:23**). This inner decay was so rampant among the religious leaders that Jesus issued His scathing attack against their unethical behavior. Jesus confronted these leaders head-on in their full-fledged, legalistic, ritualistic, and hair-splitting teachings (**23:15**). Consider the following judgments voiced by Jesus in His reaction to the religious leaders’ hypocrisy:

- Brood of vipers! (**23:33**)
- Lawless (**23:23, 28**)
- Covetous (**23:25**)
- Self-indulgent (**23:25**)
- Hypocrites (**23:28**)
- Abusive (**23:34**)
- Murderous (**23:34-35**)

Jesus’ castigation of the above leaders’ unethical behavior is not the whole story. In fact, they enter into a conspiracy with other leaders in order to bring about the death of Jesus. For instance, Matthew concludes his Gospel with a reference to this conspiracy on the part of the leaders to eliminate Jesus.

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. “But not during the Feast,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people” (**26:3-4**) (emphasis mine).

Matthew portrays the stealth employed by the so-called religious leaders to bring about the crucifixion of Jesus. They themselves do not openly arrest Jesus, but rather they employed Judas for this clandestine operation (**26:14-16**). Next, observe how they hid behind the crowd that they sent to arrest Him (**26:47**). Then, even in the trial they employed false testimony and false witnesses to gain conviction (**26:59-60**). Again, they also accused Jesus of blasphemy in order to give credence to their condemnation of Him (**26:65-68**). Once again, while Jesus was on the cross, they mocked Him (**27:41-43**). And finally, they even went so far as to try to frustrate the resurrection by sealing and guarding the tomb (**27:62-66**).

CONCLUSION

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, the religious leaders are presented in a very unfavorable light. They rejected God's point of view about His Son. They acted without authority from God. Jesus acknowledges that they have no God-given mandate to lead the children of Israel; in fact, they are children of Satan (**12:24-37**). Jesus accuses them of being of the Devil (**13:36-43; 15:12-13**). These leaders are so corrupt and evil and dishonest that they cannot recognize the power and presence of God's initiative in the history of salvation (**21:23**). Jesus held them responsible for the future destruction of Jerusalem (**22:7**). Following His seven woes, Jesus foretells the destruction of their city (**chapter 24**). As Matthew concludes his life of Christ, surely his readers must have reflected upon Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in which He forewarned His disciples: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (**7:15**).

My objective in writing this series on "false prophets" is not to attack those who apply **Matthew 7:15** to other Christians who often disagree with the "party cry," but rather to assist these individuals in handling correctly God's Word. The chief objective of this study is to help preserve the unity for which Jesus prayed in His priestly prayer (**John 17**). **Matthew 7:15** is frequently misapplied by many sincere Christians within the twenty-five or more divisions within the Stone/Campbell Movement. Hopefully, this analysis of **Matthew 7:15** will help individuals to focus more on the context when they want to understand the intent of the author. There is a need, I believe, to guard against interpretations that may not, in spite of all their sincerity, ring true to the biblical revelation itself. But often, subjective interpretations and dogmatic approaches by many Christians do much to deny the very Scriptures they claim to uphold.

Leaders (preachers, elders, and editors) should be very careful about superimposing upon a text their own speculative and subjective interpretation in order to avoid the very error that Jesus condemned among the religious leaders. May God help every Christian not to apply this Scripture (**Matthew 7:15**) to believers who hold to the use of Sunday school, individual communion cups, wine, grape juice, manner of breaking the bread in the Lord's Supper, the treasury, Bible colleges, instrumental music, hand-clapping, solo singing in the assembly, choirs, and so on.

Are you hearing this text afresh? Do not allow your traditions to stand in the way of listening once again to this biblical passage. Many Christians are so used to reading this Scripture as they have been taught by generations of godly men and women that for one to question the traditional interpretation is to question Scripture itself. God's people

must learn to have another look at and reinterpret interpretations that have been handed down for centuries. Since Christians are a product of their own religious culture, it is difficult, if not almost impossible, for believers to read the Bible without spectacles. Unconsciously, the interpretation of the church fathers has become the watchword of orthodoxy in the interpretation of this frequently altered Scripture.

It is not uncommon for the biblical message to be limited by some predetermined interpretive grid. One of the greatest ways to be sure that one's interpretation of a passage remains faithful to his or her tradition is to ignore the context. One's approach to **Matthew 7:15** through a predetermined "interpretive filter"—an interpretation handed down through generations of interpreters—should be avoided with extreme care. If one approaches this Scripture, or any Scripture for that matter, with strong subjective biases, he or she will view God's Word through colored glasses. In concluding this study on false prophets in **Matthew 7:15**, one must again ask himself or herself the question: "How did Christ employ this stinging phrase?" One should guard himself or herself against manipulating biblical material to support one's prior ecclesiastical interest. Christians must struggle to liberate the New Testament from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of ecclesiastical assumptions. One must always be on lookout to prevent his or her religious reasoning and enthusiasm from being substituted for ungrounded interpretations of one's brain. One must ever guard against the fallacy of reading his or her own experience into the world of the text.

^[1] Part three discusses the first occurrence of this phrase (*false prophets*) in the New Testament. As stated earlier, many sincere and God fearing believers frequently misapply this expression against other believers, especially when certain ones deviate from the status quo of certain factions within the body of Christ.

^[2] The first article in this series emphasized that false prophets are not necessarily individuals who fail to properly interpret the Scriptures. In part two, this author analyzed **Romans, chapters 14 and 15**, and **First Corinthians, chapter 8**, to determine if diversity in opinion, in and of itself, warrants the epithet of "false prophets." Just a perusal of these Scriptures demonstrates that Paul did not advocate unity based upon conformity, but rather, he appeals for unity in diversity as the way of peace among Christians.

^[3] Duncan S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1986), 6.

^[4] **Matthew 24:11, 24** and **Mark 13:22** will be analyzed in Part 4 of this series.

^[5] All Scripture citations are from the New International Version, unless noted otherwise.

^[6] The prevailing interpretation of "You have heard that it was said" is generally credited with the teachings of the Old Testament, but this does not appear to be correct in

light of the context. In this Sermon, Jesus is drawing attention to the original intent of the law versus the teachings of the religious leaders. For one to follow these teachers of the law is tantamount to following a “false prophet.”

^[7] Matthew also employs a number of literary techniques to call attention to the importance of certain subjects. For example, Matthew introduces us to baptism in John’s ministry: (1) baptism of the people [3:1-12] and (2) the baptism of Jesus [3:13-17], and, then, Matthew concludes his Gospel with Jesus’ command to baptize (28:16-20). Another characteristic that is quite interesting is Matthew’s report of the life of Christ; for example, He starts his book, following the genealogy of Christ, with the teachings of John and the teachings of Jesus (Sermon on the Mount—5:1--7:28), and, then, concludes his book with Jesus emphasis on “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (28:20). Following the baptism of Jesus, Matthew also informs us that Jesus “went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues” (4:23) and, then, immediately, gives the substance of that teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

^[8] Matthew makes reference to the Pharisees twenty-eight times in his Gospel: 3:7; 5:20; 9:11, 14, 34; 12:2, 14, 24, 38; 15:1, 12; 16:1, 6, 11, 12; 19:3; 21:45; 22:15, 34, 41; 23:2, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 27:62. In the Gospels, there are seventy-nine occurrences of the “Pharisees” in seventy-seven verses. Matthew makes reference to the “teachers of the law nineteen times: 2:4; 5:20; 7:29; 9:3; 12:38; 15:1; 16:21; 17:10; 20:18; 21:15; 23:2, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 26:57; 27:41. In the Gospels, there are fifty-five occurrences of the “teachers of the law” in fifty-five Bible verses. In order for one to understand Jesus’ caution in **Matthew 7:15**, it would be helpful for one to read the context of the above-mentioned Bible verses.

^[9] See also **Matthew 15:1-14**.

^[10] Jesus develops this destruction more fully in **Matthew 24**.

^[11] In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned His disciples about external behavior performed for show. In that Sermon, Jesus discloses the same mind-set (**Matthew 6:1-8**) that He addresses in **Matthew 23**.